

The date of the birth of Christ

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As the millennium draws near, we are increasingly urged to remember what it commemorates. Two thousand years before the Dome in Greenwich, there were not yet any really impressive domes in Rome: the wonderful dome which crowns the Pantheon was erected much later by Hadrian when he rebuilt the temple in the second century, and the shape of the original Pantheon, put up in 27–25 B.C. by M. Vipsanius Agrippa, right hand man of the emperor Augustus, is unknown. In any case, the Pantheon was intended to honour all the gods, but it was to be many years before ordinary Romans would recognize a new divinity to emerge from Galilee, an obscure territory on the eastern fringes of the Roman world.

On the first day of A.D. 1 Jesus of Nazareth was a very small blip on the computer screen of the Roman world, but he was fairly certainly not a new-born infant. Exactly when he was born is no longer knowable, except that it is certain that our current reckoning is wrong. The counting of years 'from the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ' was devised only in the sixth century A.D. by Dionysius Exiguus, a Scythian monk. The correct date has to be ascertained from the only extant narratives of Jesus' birth, which are to be found in the Gospels. And they provide contradictory evidence.

B.C. Herod v. A.D. tax

The problem is this. According to Luke, Jesus was born at the time of the great Roman census, which accounts for the decision of Mary and Joseph to go to Bethlehem: 'And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. And this taxing was first made when Quirinius was governor of Syria' (*Luke* 2: 1-2). But Matthew states that Jesus was born in the time of Herod. 'Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the King, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying:

"Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east ..." (*Matthew* 2: 1-2). Despite the best efforts of many scholars over the centuries, it seems certain that these two statements cannot be made compatible.

Herod the Great died in 4 B.C. The date is not in doubt: a detailed narrative of his life and his (grisly) death is preserved in Books 14 to 17 of the *Antiquities of the Jews* written at the end of the first century A.D. by the Jewish historian Josephus. For the part of his work which dealt with Herod, Josephus had a particularly knowledgeable (if biased) source in the writings of the scholar Nicholas of Damascus, who was Herod's court historian down to the king's death. But Josephus also had much to say about the census in Judaea carried out by the Syrian legate Quirinius; and he firmly dated this census to A.D. 6, when Herod's son Archelaus was deposed from rule over Judaea and direct Roman rule was imposed. The reason for Josephus' extended narrative of this event was precisely its novelty, which provoked a violent reaction against the payment of taxes to Rome; so it seems highly unlikely that a Roman census had been carried out earlier. In any case, Herod was an independent ruler, so a Roman census will not have been carried out within his realm.

It is almost certain that Luke was confused about the census, in which case the remaining evidence for fixing the time of Jesus' birth – the star – comes from the account in Matthew. Scholars have scoured the astronomical data to find a moment during Herod's lifetime when a bright star may have appeared in the heavens (to explain the vision of the three kings, on the rather dubious assumption that this too reflects historical reality). Possible dates vary from 7 to 4 B.C. But in any case Jesus will have been at or near primary school age at the beginning of our first millennium.

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